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Sections

[Focus](#)
[Columns and Reviews](#)
[Consulting](#)
[Training](#)
[News & Announcements](#)

Archives

[Browse past issues of Praxis](#)

About Us

[About Us](#)

Submissions

[Submit an article to Praxis](#)

[Home](#) » [Archives](#) » [Fall 2004 \(Volume 2 Issue 1\) - Secondary School and Community Writing Centers](#)

Building a Community Around the Writing Center

[Fall 2004 / Focus](#)

by Ginger Cooper

How to promote a college writing center as a community resource--and serve recruitment and retention needs in the process.



Ginger Cooper

Recruitment and retention are important issues on every campus but especially so on small campuses like that of Casper College. My predecessor, Bob Mittan, believed as I do that the Writing Center should serve as a community as well as a campus resource. His reasons focused on how the community could be involved with the writing center while my reasons focus on how the writing center can be involved with the community. In becoming a community resource, our center serves to demystify academe both for those in the community who feel they are too old or incapable to succeed in college and for young writers in high school who may not have decided to attend college yet. As a result, we are acquiring something of a reputation for helping students and community members with résumé cover letters and creative writing projects as well as scholarship letters and essays.

While I have always believed that writing centers are as much a community resource as libraries, making our presence known hasn't been as easily achieved. We depend on word of mouth to give our flyers credibility, so we try to make ourselves visible in the classroom and in the community. Since many of our adjuncts teach in local high schools, we are fortunate in that we can give our writing presentations to high school students who are taking Advanced Placement courses for college credit. Each of us, the writing assistants and I, give a ten- to twenty-minute presentation describing the services we offer, and we emphasize the number of people who have used our center for help in writing successful scholarship and admittance application essays, résumé cover letters, letters to the editor, short stories, non-fiction articles, and grant applications. The presentations end with our encouraging those students to tell their families and friends that we are available to help them even though they

aren't taking college classes. We attempt to make six hundred contacts each year through presentations. Word of mouth works well if we consider that some clients are referred to us by their employers, spouses, friends and children.

I like to take part in first-year orientation because students remember the person who stood on stage and encouraged them to use every resource available in order to succeed. I also like giving presentations for the Boys and Girls Club of Central Wyoming for the same reason I like giving classroom presentations. They give me the opportunity to encourage potential first-generation college students to consider coming to college here, where it's affordable and accessible, before moving on to a university. They remember me and sometimes stop in to say hello, stop me in the store to find out when we are open, or wave to me after first-year orientation. Annually, I volunteer for the Science Olympiad, where I evaluate the technical writing competition. College-bound middle and high school students from all over Wyoming participate in this competition, and I take the opportunity to introduce myself and encourage them to make use of writing center services during their academic years, especially when they prepare scholarship and admittance letters and essays. The local high schools also bring eleventh and twelfth graders to the college for tours, and we give them the thirty-minute special presentation and Writing Center tour, which usually consists of showing them the computer classroom, where the popcorn and microwave are, and discussions of how we can help them get through the roughest semester they'll ever have—the first one. Occasionally, we are asked by a business to give a writing workshop.

We have one community volunteer, Jeanne Aro, a literacy volunteer who once tutored math but prefers to donate her time helping those students who can't visit us during our scheduled hours. We schedule after-hours appointments with her for nontraditional students who need help with papers for distance education or evening courses. These students may not take classes every semester, but once they know that we're available, they call to ask questions about work-related or personal writing projects or to make appointments for face-to-face or screen-to-screen assistance.

Our online writing center is undergoing changes as my research in online pedagogies continues. Currently, the synchronous operation is located in WebCT, but we will be moving to an IRC-based channel that we can customize to fit our needs. My goal is to provide both current distance education students and potential students with accessible and immediate writing assistance. I suspect that our audience will acquire a more global sense of community because word of mouth travels more quickly online than offline. As time passes, more of our local students will find online technologies to be less of a barrier because more schools teach by means of technology. We encourage them to return to us when they have questions about word processing formats or need a reader to respond to non-academic writing projects. By making ourselves available to them after graduation, we make ourselves more visible, more accessible, and more inviting to the larger community.

We are a community of writers, and we want our Writing Center to reflect our identity. As a community, we work to make our center accessible and inviting to all. Our efforts in turn contribute to the college's recruitment and retention efforts, a service to the institution we had not intentionally set out to provide, but one that we're glad to do.

Ginger Cooper is the Writing Center Director and a composition instructor at Casper College in Casper, Wyoming. She holds BA and MA degrees from Idaho State University and is completing a Doctor of Arts program before moving on to a Ph.D. program in Composition and Rhetoric. The literary magazine, *Reflections*, published her poem, "A Question of Being," in April, 2004. Upcoming publications include *Online Tutoring for Beginners*, written in collaboration with Peer Tutor Program Coordinator Carmen Springer-Davis and funded by a Wyoming's Perkins Leadership Grant.

< Fall 2004 (Volume 2 Issue 1) - Secondary School and Community Writing Centers

up Changing Hearts and Minds >

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